

## **LIVING FREE - Week 13**

### **Monday, August 30**

As we are moving to the conclusion of the book of Numbers together, we are going to pull together what we have been learning. Walking through the wilderness with Israel, learning from their experiences. Nothing among God's people is more fundamental than listening. Our leadership language today is the language of vision and seeing. We want to envision the future, to see over the horizon. Think of how many of our metaphors focus on vision. There, I just used the word vision. But among God's people, they learned by hearing. God never made a visible appearance to his people. But he spoke his word, giving the people the law, giving directions to Moses and warnings and instructions to Israel. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." Yes, God says, "Listen up, and harken to my word." Yes, we are a people of the ear rather than a people of the eye. We cannot see the Lord, but we live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This means we must learn the art of listening. The common refrain of the book is: the Lord spoke to Moses saying... This phrase is repeated over and over again. Moses didn't see the Lord, but he often heard the Lord.

Here is the final verse in the book:

Numbers 36:13

*These are the commandments and the rules that the Lord commanded through Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.*

Yes, this book and what is recorded are made up of the messages the Lord relayed to his people through Moses. Now, this theme runs through the story of the Lord's people. We can think of the way the Lord spoke to the prophet Elijah. After his battle on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal, Elijah was overwhelmed and depressed. He met with the Lord, and the Lord visited with him. It wasn't in a great fire or a mighty wind that the Lord came. It was the still small voice of the Lord that he heard. I have shared with our Granada family about the thorn in my flesh. For more than a decade I have lived with an oppressive ringing in my ears. Actually, the sound is more like a hissing sound. And, yes, I have sought the help of experts, but at present there is no reliable cure for the tinnitus that I suffer with. That is what it is called. It is a hearing impairment. The problem for me is the noise is so loud that there are many soft sounds I miss entirely. I think we all have a spiritual hearing impairment. We cannot hear God's voice because there is so much noise in our lives. We are overwhelmed by the noise. God might be speaking and we would not even know it. I also think that in the presence of many voices, it takes time to come to discern the voice of the Lord. We might mistake his voice for another voice we hear. Isn't it a joy when you know someone so well that you immediately recognize their voice when they call you? And, that you can tell by the sound of their voice how they are doing and what is happening to them? I remember that my mentor would track with me by listening to my sermons. He said he knew by listening to my voice what condition I was in and how I was doing. What if we could so tune our ears to hear the word of God?

Now, I am not one of those people that has heard the voice of the Lord audibly. But I would love to hear his voice. His voice is the one that spoke our world into being. His voice uttered the promises that brought about our salvation. It is his word that became flesh in our world in Jesus, full of grace and truth. One of the most enjoyable things Sandy and I have done through the years is reading aloud to each other. Though the words are the words of a book, we have come to enjoy each other's voices and to really know each other through the tones and sounds we have heard. It is said the great naturalist John Muir could, on the darkest night, tell the type of pine trees that were around him by the sound of the wind blowing through the needles. What if we could come to know the sound of the Lord's voice in this way? I have often wondered what the Lord's voice sounded like to Moses. I would like to come to know the voice of the Lord the way I came to know the voices of others I love. Hear O Israel... For faith comes by hearing, hearing the word of God... But here's the thing. I think we need to be willing to stop and create the space to be with God, the space to really listen.

Now, let's rethink leadership. Maybe it is less vision and more sounding out the truth God shares with us. What if leadership was voice-activated? What if we are meant to discover God's soundtrack, to tune our lives to his spoken word? What if we are meant to learn the Lord's music as he sings over us?

Let's pray:

God of grace and glory, speak for your servant is listening. May we live by every word that comes from your mouth, O Lord. Tune my heart to receive your word. Let your words come to my ears that I might hear you and rejoice. Thank you that you are not silent. That you reach from infinity to us through your living word. In the name of Jesus, amen.

### **Tuesday, August 31**

Sandy and I have a beautiful golden doodle. Her name is Bailey, and she is seven years old. She is playful and such a terrific companion. She comes to see me off to bed at night and is there to greet me in the morning. My favorite time with Bailey is when I come home. Her tail is wagging, and she is excited to see me. She acts like I have been gone for ages when I may have only been out for a short time to run an errand. Folks that know more about dogs than I do say that dogs are uniquely tuned to give and receive love with humans. I can see this is true. But the joy she expresses is powerful and refreshing. As we walk alongside Israel, there are also these moments of joy. Not too long ago, we studied the passage about the well of water the Lord provided.

*"Spring up, O well!—Sing to it!—<sup>18</sup>the well that the princes made, that the nobles of the people dug, with the scepter and with their staffs."* -Numbers 21:17-18

Yes, the people took up this song of praise to celebrate the gift of life as provided by the Lord. Water was life. In the wilderness, the sound of water is one of the most beautiful. What are the things that provoke you to sing?

*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arms have worked salvation for him.* -Psalm 98:1

Later in this chapter, in the book of Numbers, there is also what has been called the ballad of Heshbon. It is a celebration of the victories of Israel. It begins:

*Come to Heshbon, let it be rebuilt, let the city of Sihon be established.* -Numbers 21:27

Israel was surprised at their success and how the Lord provided for them. They sang of these victories including this moment in the vocabulary of their joy. It's important that we see these moments. Why? Egypt was a dark place. It was joyless and sad. It was in leaving Egypt that joy came to Israel. Actually, the Passover was a celebration of freedom. It was the signal that God was opening the door on life. New days were coming, and sorrow would flee away.

Now, we may think of the wilderness as not fitting for praise. That makes these moments even more striking. Joy came in the wilderness to the people of God. It is then we see joy for what it is, a gift of God. We don't manufacture it on our own. It is not the same as optimism, or even the hope that things will be better in the future. It comes from outside of it. We hear joy in the prison letters of Paul. The shock of his little letter to the Philippians is that though Paul is in prison, he is content and joy filled. How can he be? Joy is received as a gift. It is all of grace and comes from the Lord. I think of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail singing songs of praise before an earthquake shakes the prison and sets them free. They already were free, trusting in God's purposes in their lives. I think the jail was shaken before the earthquake came. The other prisoners must have thought Paul and Silas were crazy, praising God in prison. But why not? They knew they were in the hands of God. So, this is this beautiful joy that comes in the wilderness, that comes when we are stuck in prison. And, yes, scripture tells us it was for the

joy that was set before Jesus that he endured the cross and scorned the shame of it all. Joy is a beautiful thing.

Now, we tell ourselves “I’ll be happy when...” and you fill in the blank. But happiness is about what happens. Joy is about resting in God and knowing his good plans for us. Joy provides a contentment in our condition, however we might see it change. Joy transforms a prison into a sanctuary. It really is the giving of life to us from God. What ushers in the joy of the Lord? Tolkien, the writer of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, called it a eucatastrophe. That word is the combination of two others: the word for good and the word for catastrophe. A catastrophe is a sudden turn for the worst. But Tolkien has added the good prefix to speak of a sudden and shocking turn for the best. This is turn when the slaves are set free. When water springs from a rock. When manna is found in the wilderness. When ill-equipped Israel defeats her enemies. We expect a catastrophe, and instead the sudden turn brings life and freedom. This is the source of our joy. We are living through a eucatastrophe, a sudden turn in God’s grace and favor. This is why Jesus took on the cross. A turn was coming. This is why Paul could rejoice in prison. The turn in his life had already come. The violent man was redeemed and restored in God and given a mission to serve. This is why we live in joy. Not because everything is peachy and perfect today, but because the turn of God’s grace has come upon us as well.

Let’s pray:

Faithful and gracious Father, by your love you reframe everything in our lives. Your grace places us on a new foundation. Your goodness provides us a living hope. Your presence secures for us a new identity. Enable us to live in the joy of your goodness today, and to know the joy of your salvation. We pray in the name of our king, Jesus. Amen.

### **Wednesday, September 1**

As a pastor I spend a lot of time with families whose loved ones have passed away. Oftentimes, these moments are emotional and sometimes very stressful. But one thing I have come to appreciate is the personal and family sharing that takes place during memorial services. I know the person that has passed away, but I am given another perspective of someone looking from the outside in. I am given another view of the person’s life. Recently, during the memorial service celebrating my younger brother Brad’s life, his youngest son spoke about him explaining what it was like to have Brad as his father. These insights were precious to me and opened up a way to see my brother that I had no knowledge of. I came to appreciate him even more.

Now, as we read the book of Numbers, we are given a view of Israel and of the Lord from inside Israel. The book is made up of the observations of Moses. But there are places where we are given a perspective of the Lord and Israel from the outside.

Here is our text for today:

Numbers 14:13-14

*But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, <sup>14</sup>and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people....*

Now, these are the words of Moses after the people rebel against the Lord. The Lord pronounces a judgment on his people, one that is well-deserved. But Moses makes his appeal to the Lord, in part based on how the Egyptians see Israel and the exodus. Indeed, Egypt must be amazed at the success Israel had against their army. How could a slave people such as Israel have a chance against the army of Pharaoh? The whole story reveals the power and majesty of the Lord. Also, the Lord freed his people in a way that revealed the weakness of the gods of Egypt. He showed the people that their gods were nothing. You see, we begin to see the way Egypt and the surrounding nations view the Lord and his people. We find hints of the reputation of the Lord and his people all along the way. Do you ever wonder how other people would tell your story? What does your life look like to them? Now, I don’t ask this as an

inducement to live up to others' expectations. That is not the point. The point is that our lives tell a story. Hopefully, they tell the story of grace. Not that we are the heroes, but that God has been gracious to us. God has provided for us. Here are the words of Jesus:

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.<sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. -Matthew 5:15-16*

Yes, God does his work of saving us before the world. Others can see the evidence of God's grace in your life. People often ask me what the best part of being in ministry is. For me, it is seeing God work in people's lives, the evidence of God shown in the stories of people as they enjoy and live by grace. That is what Jesus is speaking about here. Just as the nations watched a slave people gain their freedom, learn an ordered life in the wilderness and enter into the land God had for them, there is evidence of the Lord among his people. Yes, there was food and water in the wilderness. But it was more than that. A nation came to be. People were unified and given an identity and source of mission in the world. The surrounding nations could see. This is what Moses is talking about to the Lord. The nations can see his glory in the project of forming and establishing a people against all odds and in the face of overwhelming obstacles. The Lord did it. I think this is what Jesus is saying. His words are from the sermon on the mount. He has just spoken the beatitudes. What happens when a person is transformed by grace? They begin to shine a light into the world. The life of grace flows from them in what they do and how they love. The power of this is incontrovertible. It reveals the glory of God at work among a people.

Now, as I read these passages from Numbers and also the words of Jesus, I wonder what people would say about us. Would they say they saw this life flow through us? Is there a light shining that people can see? We are beginning to see why the gospel grew at such a rapid pace in the world. The surrounding people could see the light of the glory of the grace of God in the lives of ordinary people. People could see what was not from our world. A peace. A joy. A service. A kindness. A gentleness that was beyond us.

Let us pray:

Lord God almighty, let your kingdom come, your will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Through your Holy Spirit cause your life to flow from us to provide springs in the desert. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

## ***Thursday, September 2***

On November 23, 1654, the greatest of the world's mathematicians, Blaise Pascal, had an experience of the presence of God. It was a two-hour encounter. He wrote of it in part:

*From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God.*

Yes, the fire came. What he could not understand, he experienced. What he couldn't possibly know, fully invaded his life. O yes, he knew about the Lord. But this was a meeting with God. Here is more of his description:

*Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. Let me never be separated from him. He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel: Renunciation, total and sweet. Complete submission to Jesus Christ...*

Now, today, as we read his words, they are powerful. Like someone describing the indescribable. But it was all over so quickly. He speaks of the moment passing in two hours.

Then it was gone. He never had such an experience again. It was like lightning striking, beautiful when you see the light of it. But, in an instant, the light had gone out. The fire died down. Of course, Pascal didn't want to lose it. He wanted to hold onto this moment. So, Pascal wrote it down.

Now, as we read Numbers together, we are being invited into the stories of Israel's encounters with the Lord. To us they seem like one rebellion after another, but their stories are recorded as special moments because they had the assurance the Lord was there with them.

Our text for today says:

Numbers 33:1-2

*These are the stages of the people of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. <sup>2</sup>Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord, and these are their stages according to their starting places.*

Why did Moses want to write down each stage of their journey? We saw this passage last week, but we failed to consider this question. Their moments with the Lord were like the lightning strikes, encounters with the Lord that passed so quickly and then were gone. These moments didn't come every day, but if they failed to write them down, they would quickly lose the memory of them. I think that Moses not only wanted to chronicle their journey, he wanted to capture the moments they had with the Lord. These were precious times when the veil between heaven and earth was thin and Moses and the people experienced the Lord's presence. As a follower of Jesus, I have not had many of these moments through the years. I have never heard the Lord speak audibly to me. But there have been moments when the presence of God has seemed particularly rich. There have been times when I have been with groups of people, and God has drawn near. These are moments like the one Jacob experienced when the Lord appeared to him in the night. The next day he said, "The Lord was in this place and I did not know it." Now, when we tell others about our experience, they may think us a bit strange. They may not be sure we are playing with a full deck, so to speak. But those times are actually more real, more vivid, more alive, not less. I hear that from the experience of Pascal. Now, we cannot cause these moments to come. For me, I have had only a handful across all my years. I cannot plan these moments with God, nor predict their coming. Again, it is sort of like the striking of lightning. Then the moment is gone. That is why, like Moses and Pascal, it is good for us to write them down. This helps us to remember what has happened and to return to that place in our thoughts and memories.

Here's what Pascal did. He took the record he made, the experience that he wrote down, and he sewed it into the lining of his coat so that he would not be without it. Actually, it was found there on his jacket when he died. He never wanted to forget his night of fire when the Lord drew near to him.

Let's pray:

Loving God and faithful Father, we want to know you, not just know about you. We long for your presence. Thank you for your promise that those who seek find, and those who knock find an open door. Today, we come seeking and knocking. Draw near to us for we are drawing near to you. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Friday, September 3**

There is this passage in the book of Hebrews chapter ten, verse thirty-one:

*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

It seems a strange thing to say. But it is true. Sometimes when a person comes to faith in Christ, they will tell me that they expect their life to become easy or at least easier. When they tell me this, I chuckle because I know better. Here's what I mean, and the story of Israel is the best example. Walking with God is serious business. Perhaps, think of the time when Israel

sinned by making the golden calf. Moses was away from the camp at the time receiving the law. There was nothing more ironic than that. When Moses returned it was not a pretty sight.

Here's what the Lord told Moses:

*Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.* -Exodus 33:3

The Lord told the people that he would fulfill his promise to give them the land. He would do what he said. But he would not journey with them. Why not? He would not be able to tolerate their disbelief and disobedience. For goodness' sake, he would likely destroy them. Now, God was not throwing a tantrum refusing to go with the people. He was speaking the truth. Do you really want to be in the company with God? When younger believers ask and are interested, I will tell them that their lives will not get easier. God can mess up your life, at least the way you have your life now. Walking with him will change everything. He will mess with your life priorities, devastate the identity you have built for yourself and reorder your life.

Here is C. S. Lewis explaining:

*Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.*

Yes, we ask God for a little touch up paint, and he tears the house down and starts afresh. It feels good and is devastating at the same time. Our lives are turned upside down. This is the story of God's people. They think all God has in mind is bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, and that sounds pretty good, but he wants to make them into a people, a nation. They are to become his people. His desire is that they live by faith in him and come to reflect his glory to the world. No wonder their journey is so painful. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. This means that faith in Christ is serious business. Jesus doesn't want to be a side issue in your life. He is your life. That means your life will change. And, this change is going to hurt. Look at Israel and you will see how radical a thing it is. Yes, God says that if he goes with them, he may destroy them on the way.

Now, back to that scene in Exodus, Moses does not accept the Lord's word to him:

*Moses said to the Lord, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'<sup>13</sup> Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."* -Exodus 33:12-13

Moses tells the Lord in no uncertain terms that the people are his. They are already his. But Moses says more than that. He says, we need to know your ways, so that we will know how to walk with you. In other words, we cannot know how to walk with you unless you show us. They did not know how to walk with a holy God, and we don't know that either. That is the purpose of this time they have in the wilderness. It is also the purpose of our time and our lives here.

Here what happened next:

*And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."<sup>15</sup> And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here."* -Exodus 33:14-15

The Lord promised to go with his people. He would lead them and teach them and shape their lives. He would correct them and train them and discipline. I love what Moses said, if you are not going with us, there is no sense in us going at all. There you have it. This journey makes no sense without the Lord leading and teaching us. But the good news, and yes, the hard news, is that the Lord will go with his people on the way. This is true for us as well. God will rearrange your life. He will turn your world upside down with his presence and his love. But there is no sense going on this journey without him.

Let's pray:

Lord God, there are so many times when I do not understand your ways. But I will trust you. If you will not go with me on the journey, I have no desire to go. My heart and my flesh may fail, but you are the strength of my life. Sustain me during these days when life seems to be changing so quickly and also give me your rest. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Saturday, September 4**

There is what seems like a contradiction in scripture in the book of Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Here are the two passages in question. The first is in Numbers 13:1-2:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them."*

Here is the second from Deuteronomy 1:22:

*Then all of you came near me and said, 'Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land for us and bring us word again of the way by which we must go up and the cities into which we shall come.'*

Now, the book of Deuteronomy is an extended sermon that Moses gives to the people before his death recounting much of what happened in the wilderness. Notice that coming in chapter one of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses' sermon begins very near the time when the spies are sent into the land. But do you hear the discrepancy? In Numbers, Moses says the Lord commanded spies be selected from each of the tribes. Later on, he says the people came up with the idea. Has Moses forgotten what actually happened? Does he now blame the entire episode on the people? Or, has he come to a different way of looking at this event? He doesn't tell us. But I think both of his words are true. He is telling us about the scene from two perspectives like witnesses might see a car accident. In the second case, the people were eager to get to their destination. After God gave the people his law, he began to order their lives and give structure to the nation. Moses told the people that the Lord had land waiting for them. True to form, the people wanted to get there as soon as possible, even though the Lord knew they were not ready. But how would they learn this? How could they see this? The Lord told them to send spies into the land.

Now, as I read this, it seems clear that having a free life is more challenging, more daunting than we think. We think freedom means living without constraints, but think about it. If you are set free, you have new decisions to make. These were decisions that were made for you before. But now you must make them. You can do what you want, but you have to choose what you want. Then you have to live with your choices. So, we might say it something like this: The more freedom we have, the more responsibility we come to assume. We become more responsible as a result, not less. This is what Israel has to learn. Yes, they can send spies into the land to explore, but that will leave them with a decision to make. They will have to live with that decision. Freedom requires choices, and that means responsibility. This is no different for us as Christ-followers. One of the great German theologians was visiting the US a generation ago, and he was asked what kind of theology he would write if he were an American. He stated: *I would try to elaborate a theology of freedom.* He could see that freedom was being proclaimed here in America, but the understanding of that freedom was

thin and weak. It did not include an understanding of the responsibility inherent in freedom. Then he said he would write about: *that freedom to which the Son frees us...which as his gift, is the one real human freedom*. I think he had that right. We need to know what our freedom in Christ consists of and how to live a free life. Yes, we are free from sin and death. But what are we to do with our lives? How are we to live this freedom? There is a false teaching that says freedom is doing whatever I want. But we learn that a true freedom is being able to live as God created me to live from the beginning. It is being able to enjoy and serve the living God because the constraints of my sin have been obliterated by the love of Jesus.

Let's pray:

Loving God, you have set us free from those things that have held us in bondage. Our sin does not define us, and death no longer holds us. Show us how to live in your love. Teach us your ways, O Lord, that we might walk in your truth. For we pray in your name. Amen.